THANOS KALAMIDAS

THE COLOUR OF THE ARMBAND SERIES

THE REMEMBERING ONES

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Thanos Kalamidas

The remembering ones

"The colour of the armband" Series

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The haze arrived before dawn, punctual and necrotic.

Kurt stood on the second-floor deck of the charred ruin, watching the orange-grey tendrils curl around the settlement's perimeter. They moved with a desperate, simulated life, blind fingers seeking a grip on a reality that no longer wanted them. Twenty feet of sterile cement acted as a metaphysical barrier; the haze would not cross. The elders mumbled about the Before Times, invoking the ghosts of molecular chemistry and forgotten synthetic compounds. Kurt, however, harboured the suspicion that the universe was merely tired. Some mysteries existed solely as a buffer to keep the human mind from collapsing into its own gravity.

Below the square was a vacuum. The bus sat in its designated grave, a rusty hulk already collecting a shroud of fine, toxic dust. The purple meat, the day's grim harvest, had been hauled into the failing hum of the cold storage. The Red Armbands had retreated to their domestic bunkers, nursing their terrors and the quiet, jagged memories of what Jan had claimed to see.

Kurt's hand strayed to his own armband. Orange. The hue of the middleman, the nomad, the bureaucratic ghost. He was a man of the transition, born into orange and married into red, now functioning as a lawyer in a world where the concept of "Justice" had been replaced by "Survival."

The haze thickened, gaining a sort of malevolent sentience. Kurt found himself thinking of his twin sister, a girl who had died at the threshold of birth, leaving behind a vacuum that had defined his entire psychic geometry. Above him, the two moons hung like mismatched, cataract-filmed eyes, staring down with cosmic indifference.

Then there were the Blackes. And there was Jan.

Kurt stepped into the gloom of the inner room. Jan was there, huddled over a lukewarm heater that

clicked with a rhythmic, mechanical heartbeat.

"It looked at me, Kurt," Jan whispered. His voice sounded like dry parchment being torn. "Not with eyes. With an *intention*."

"Blackes don't have intentions, Jan," Kurt said, his voice flat, trying to ground the room. "They have metabolic requirements. They're biological machines designed to process protein. Usually ours."

"No. This was... an exchange." Jan looked up, his pupils dilated into black voids. "I fucking spoke with it. Or it spoke through me. It used my own tongue like a borrowed tool."

"And what did this 'tool' say?" Kurt leaned against the peeling wallpaper, feeling the building's own weary consciousness pressing against his back.

Jan shivered, a fine, neurological tremor. "It said that the haze isn't coming for us. It said the haze *is* us. We're just the parts that haven't evaporated yet."

Kurt stared at him. He felt the familiar tilt of the world, the subtle shift where the objective reality of the settlement began to dissolve into the subjective nightmare of the wastes. Everyone knew Blackes were mutants, the cannibalistic detritus of a scorched

earth who had evolved past the inefficiency of language into the purity of hunger.

But if they were talking, then the hunger was no longer enough.

"You're tired," Kurt said, though he didn't believe it. "The oxygen scrubbers are failing again. We're all hallucinating the same ghost."

"It knew your sister's name, Kurt."

The air in the room suddenly felt heavy, as if the atmospheric pressure had doubled. Kurt didn't answer. He turned toward the window, watching the two moons. He had a premonition, a cold, certain twitch in his frontal lobe, that the "Truths" they had used to wall themselves in were about to become as porous as the haze itself.

The ontology of the beast

The saloon didn't just smell; it perspired. It gave off the thick, claustrophobic reek of fermented cactus pulp and the kind of stale, sour fear that clings to the lungs like radioactive dust.

Thirty-seven souls had compressed themselves into a vacuum meant for twenty. On the walls, the torches flickered with a manic, artificial energy, throwing jumping shadows that suggested every man in the room was merely a poorly rendered copy of someone else. Kurt sat at the vanguard, his bulk a gravitational constant in a creaking chair. He watched the faces before him with the practiced disinterest of a man who knew that a visible emotion was just another piece of data for the universe to use against you.

Jan stood in the dead centre of the room, an organic tripod leaning on his cane. Kevin hovered by the door, a twitching nerve of a man, while Sven stood beside him, a shadow that had finally achieved three-dimensional form. Ida sat alone at a corner table, her back against the sweating wall. Her eyes scanned the room with a mechanical precision that Kurt identified as either terminal paranoia or a higher wisdom; on this derelict rock, the two were functionally identical.

"Recite the data again," Kurt commanded. His voice was heavy, like lead shielding.

Jan gave a weary, cervical shake of his head. "The repetition won't change the variables, Kurt. You were there for the initial input."

"For *them*," Kurt said, gesturing a thick hand at the huddled mass of humanity. "I need them to process it. Not me."

So Jan told it again. He spoke of the hunting party, three days out into the entropic silence of the wastes. He described the tracks in the sand, geometry that didn't fit any known biological gait. He spoke of the figures lurking in the lee of a jagged rock formation,

their armbands a chaotic spectrum of brown, blue and impossibly, blasphemously ...black.

"The anomaly stepped forward," Jan said, his throat working as if trying to swallow a stone. "It opened its mouth. It didn't scream; it didn't howl. It spoke. The voice... it sounded like tectonic plates grinding against one another in a dry basement."

Jan shivered. "It said, 'The orange ones return. This is noted. The record is updated.'"

A ripple of existential dread moved through the crowd. Old Man Tom, a crumpled heap of rags in the corner, let out a sound that was half-laugh, half-wheeze and the sound of a machine finally running out of oil.

"Blackes don't use syntax," someone spat from the shadows of the back. "They don't have records. They have stomachs."

"Correct," Jan agreed, his voice thin. "They didn't. Until now."

Kurt stood, and the agonised groan of his chair silenced the room. "Let's look at the baseline reality. The Blackes have always been our local constant, mu-

tants, cannibals, biological predators. They represent a simplified cycle: they take, they kill, they consume. They don't negotiate, they don't communicate, and they certainly don't engage in bureaucratic observation." He paused, letting the silence weigh on them. "So, we are faced with a shift in the nature of the beast. What changed the programming? How? And what is the projected outcome of this new 'noting'?"

The door didn't just open; it surrendered.

The room swivelled as one organism. A figure was silhouetted against the harsh, monochromatic grey of the morning, a tall, skeletal thing wearing the brown armband of the sinkhole traders. His face was a mask of dust and a darker, viscous fluid. *Organic matter in a state of decay,* Kurt thought. *Dried blood.*

"They're manifesting," the man gasped. His voice was a cracked record. "The Blackes. They're coming. But they aren't alone."

Kurt was across the room before his motor cortex had fully logged the decision. He caught the man's arm; it felt like a bundle of dry sticks and guided him to a chair. "Identify yourself. Provide a point of origin."

“Brown Armbands... the sinkholes.” The man’s eyes were wide, unfocused, staring at a reality no one else could see yet. “Three days ago, the sky didn’t change, but everything under it did. Not just Blackes, things with them. Constructs wearing armbands we didn’t recognise. And one... one that didn’t have a pulse. It moved, but it wasn’t alive. It was... an imitation of life.”

“Isaid’s settlement?” Kurt asked. The sinkholes were the primary hub for the Brown Armbands.

“Deleted,” the man whispered. “The children, the ancients, the entire population. They didn’t just kill them. They harvested some. The rest... they were just... discontinued.”

He fell silent. The implication hung in the air like smog.

Kurt looked at Jan, at Sven, at Kevin, and finally at Ida. The four of them had gravitated toward the door, their bodies already angling toward the bus parked in the square, a rusted, metal womb that promised the only escape from the encroaching void.

“No,” Kurt said, the word flat and final.

Ida raised an eyebrow, her expression one of sharp, intellectual curiosity. “No? Is that a theological objection or a tactical one?”

“You aren’t venturing out there,” Kurt said. “Not while the variables are this unstable. We need more data.”

“That is the fundamental paradox, isn’t it?” Ida stood, her chair scraping against the floor with a sound like a dying bird. “We lack the information to move but the information can only be acquired by moving. We’re trapped in a feedback loop. The only way to find the source of the ‘noting’ is to go to the place where the notes are being taken.”

“The answers are a lure,” Kurt warned. “A trap designed for our specific brand of curiosity.”

“Of course it’s a trap,” Ida said, her eyes boring into Kurt’s. “Reality itself is a trap. But a trap only functions if the prey behaves according to the predicted biological imperatives. We have a wild card. We have a factor they haven’t accounted for in their little record books.”

“The bus?” Kevin asked, his voice pathetic with hope.

“No, Kevin. Not the machine.” Ida’s gaze didn’t waver from Kurt. “We have the man who refuses to be noted. We have you.”

The nature of memory

Kurt had never breathed a word about the dreams. To speak of them was to admit to a kind of psychic rot, a leak in the seal of his own reality.

They arrived most nights, jagged, strobe-light fragments of a biography that didn't belong to him. He was haunted by ghosts of places he had never stepped foot in, faces that carried the weight of intimacy without the history. There was a woman with hair the hue of Anne's, but her features possessed a soft, high-definition clarity that the harsh desert light of this world could never produce. A child, too, possessing his own eyes, eyes that hadn't yet learned to squint against the dust. They lived in a structure of impossible geometry, walls of some synthetic, alabaster polymer that felt warmer than stone. Inside,

machines didn't just function; they *existed*. They hummed with a sentient purpose, blinking their status lights like slow, rhythmic heartbeats, whispering in disembodied, melodic synthetics.

In the dreams, his arm was bare. No armband. No brand of belonging. Just skin.

After the meeting, after the Brown Armbands survivor had been dragged off to the healer's hut and the crowd had dissolved into their private architectures of fear, Kurt sat entombed in the saloon. He nursed a cup of fermented cactus pulp, a liquid that tasted like rusted copper and regret, and tried to pinpoint the infection's start.

Six months, he calculated. *Perhaps seven.* It was a synchronized arrival: his nightmares and Jan's first report of the 'talking' Blackes.

He didn't believe in coincidence. On this planet, coincidence was merely a linguistic mask for a causal chain you were too ignorant to see.

The door creaked, a dry, metallic groan. Anne slipped inside, her red hair catching the torchlight like a chemical fire. She sat across from him, an uninvited weight in the booth, reached for his cup, and drained a third of the caustic fluid.

“You’re brooding again, Kurt,” she said, her voice like sandpaper on silk. “I can hear the gears grinding from across the room. It’s a loud, mechanical sound.”

“I’m thinking, Anne. There’s a distinction.”

“Not in your head. In your head, thinking is just a more aggressive form of grieving.” She slid the cup back, the ceramic clicking against the scarred wood. “What’s the plan for the children? Or are we just waiting for the Blackes to process them into scrap?”

Kurt looked up, his eyes bloodshot. “The children?”

“Ida. Sven. Kevin. Jan. They’re biological prototypes, Kurt. Young, volatile, convinced their subjective experience is the sum total of the universe. They’re the worst kind of martyrs to send into a kinetic trap. They think they’re invincible because they haven’t lived long enough to feel their own obsolescence.”

Kurt leaned back, the shadows of the saloon playing over his face like a faulty transmission. “You want me to play shepherd? To stop them?”

“I want you to join the exodus.”

The words hung between them, heavy and radioac-

tive. Kurt opened his mouth to offer a standard-issue refusal, but Anne raised a sharp, commanding hand.

"You're a statistical anomaly, Kurt. You rolled into this settlement fifteen years ago, wrapped in an orange armband you claimed you'd scavenged from a corpse. No history. No memory-banks. Just a blank slate with a pulse. We took you in because orange signifies the void, the 'Permanent Transition.' The possibility of a New Man."

Kurt remained silent, a statue of a man waiting for his internal clock to reset.

"But I've been monitoring you," Anne continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You possess 'knowledge-without-acquisition.' You look at the triple moons as if you're solving a navigation equation. And you ...only you can decipher the linguistic graffiti on the walls of the buried cities. That's not a local skill set, Kurt. That's a legacy."

She leaned closer, her scent a mix of ozone and sage. "You aren't a product of the Change. You're an artefact from *Before*."

"The 'Before Times' collapsed two centuries ago, Anne," Kurt retorted, a flare of irritation breaking his

stasis. “I’m forty. The math doesn’t check out. I’m not a relic.”

“Time is a subjective construct, a convenient hallucination for those who can’t handle the overlap,” Anne shrugged, her eyes reflecting the flickering torchlight like a cat’s. “The old myths say that before the Great Change, humanity could fracture its consciousness. They could leap between star systems, stretch their lifespans until they broke, and upload their very souls into crystalline lattices. What if you’re a stray signal? What if you’re not *from* here, what if you’re *from* there, and your real self is just waiting for the hardware to reconnect?”

Kurt’s fingers drifted instinctively to his armband. Orange. The colour of the fluid, the unfixed, the terrifyingly new.

“What is it you’re actually proposing?”

“I’m saying the Blackes, those mechanical nightmares and your sudden psychic bleed-through aren’t separate events. They’re symptoms of the same reality-shift. Whatever woke them up is calling you home.” Anne stood up, her shadow stretching long and distorted across the floor. “Go with the children, Kurt. Don’t do it to save their skins, they’re already written into the script. Go because your amnesia is a

lie, and the truth is out there in the dust, waiting for you to remember your original programming."

She turned and vanished into the night. Kurt sat alone, listening to the saloon walls breathe, watched by flickering shadows that suggested everything, the cup, the table, his own hands, was merely a clever projection of something far older and much colder.

The ontology of the enemy

The bus groaned with the weary, arthritic soul of a dying animal as it laboured up the dune. It was a mechanical carcass kept alive only by the stubborn, frantic will of its occupants.

Kevin drove, his thin frame less a man and more a frantic extension of the steering column. His eyes scanned the horizon with the twitchy intensity of a biological organism that had finally accepted its role as prey. Beside him, Jan wrestled with the small cannon's targeting system, a primitive, spiteful bit of hardware. He propped his mangled leg on a crate of ammunition, the limb feeling like an alienated object he was forced to carry around. In the rear, Sven and

Ida sat in a vacuum of silence, their weapons across their laps like heavy, iron crucifixes. Their faces had transcended mere fear; they had reached that flat, expressionless plateau of the terminally resigned.

Kurt stood in the aisle, one hand braced against the rusted ceiling, watching the desert scroll past the windows like a reel of corrupted film. Two days out from the settlement, and the universe had provided… nothing. No tracks, no silhouettes, no manifestations of the Blackes or their nebulous patrons.

"The silence is wrong," Jan said. It wasn't a comment; it was a diagnostic report on reality itself. "It's too coherent."

"What?" Kevin hissed, not looking away from the glare.

"The vacuum, Kevin. Nature abhors it, but something out here is manufacturing it. We should've seen Elephines, beasts of burden for a burdened world. They're usually constant. But even the birds have been edited out of the sky."

Kevin's knuckles were white against the wheel. "Maybe they've just found a better place to be. Somewhere we aren't."

"Animals don't 'find' better places, Kevin. They react to the encroaching wrongness," Jan's voice was a bitter rasp. "They have the good sense to flee when the local reality starts to fray. We're the only ones stupid enough to keep driving into the tear."

The bus crested the dune, and Kurt felt the phantom click of a key turning in a lock he hadn't known existed.

Below them, nestled in a shallow valley of shifting silicate, lay the skeletal remains of a civilization. Not the Brown Armbands' squalid sinkhole, that was two days east, but a relic of a more elegant, terrifying era. Walls of smooth, synthetic pearl-white rose in curves and non-Euclidean angles that seemed to bypass the optic nerve and itch directly against the brain. And in the center, a tower reached toward the sky, a frozen, ceramic finger pointing at a God who had long since moved to a different galaxy.

"What is that?" Kevin whispered. "That's not human. It's too… intentional."

"It's an old memory," Kurt said. The words felt like they were being spoken through him by a ghost. "I know this place. I've walked those halls in the sleep-state. I've felt those walls under my hands when my

hands were younger and the air was still breathable."

"The Blackes," Ida said, her voice a flat line of dread. "Look at the choreography."

Figures emerged from the shadows of the white curves. Dozens, then hundreds. They wore the tribal markers, brown, blue, red, yellow, black, but the tribalism was gone. They moved with a terrifying, synchronized grace, a hive-mind masquerade of cooperation.

"They've been unified," Sven observed, his voice hollow. "They aren't fighting each other. They've found a common denominator. Something has rewritten their programming."

"And there," Jan pointed, his finger trembling. "The source of the new logic."

Behind the ranks of the unified, something massive displaced the heat haze. It was a monstrosity of gleaming chrome and hydraulic malice. It walked on four articulated legs, miming the gait of an Elephine, but its movements were too smooth, too efficient, a parody of life rendered in cold, unfeeling steel. On its back, a heavy cannon swivelled with the dispassionate precision of an eye looking through a microscope.

“The Metal Elephine,” Kevin breathed, his foot hovering over the accelerator. “The Mine Collective. It’s not a myth. It’s a hardware update.”

“They’ve been waiting,” Kurt said. He felt a strange, detached calm, as if he were a character in a book reading his own dialogue. “This isn’t an ambush. It’s a homecoming.”

The cannon fired.

The world tilted. Kevin wrenched the wheel, and the bus lurched in a violent, metal spasm as the spot they had occupied a microsecond before vanished in a plume of kinetic fury. The blast rocked the chassis, slamming Kurt against the vibrating wall and sending Ida sliding across the floor like a discarded doll.

“Accelerate!” Jan screamed. “Don’t let the engine realize it’s dead! Go!”

The engine roared, a desperate, internal combustion prayer. The bus plummeted down the dune, sand spraying in a golden veil, while the Metal Elephine tracked them with the icy, mathematical patience of a predator that knows its prey has nowhere to go but forward.

“They’re herding us,” Ida shouted over the din,

clinging to the window frame. “Look at the impact craters! They aren’t aiming for the hull, they’re aiming for the exit routes. They’re steering us like cattle.”

“They want us inside the perimeter,” Kurt said, staring at the white tower. The structure seemed to hum in a frequency he could feel in his teeth.

“Then we decline the invitation,” Jan snapped. He swung the bus’s small cannon around, his face contorted in a mask of defiance. “Let’s see if this scrap-metal can dent the future.”

He fired. The shell arced, a lonely, defiant spark and blossomed against the Metal Elephine’s flank. The creature staggered, a momentary glitch in its predatory rhythm, but it kept coming. Its chrome hide remained unmarred, reflecting the sun with an insulting brilliance.

“That’s not just armour,” Kevin muttered, his eyes wide. “That’s a different kind of matter.”

The bus hit the valley floor, the suspension screaming in protest. The smooth white buildings closed in around them, their surfaces reflecting the bus in distorted, nightmarish ribbons. The figures, the multi-coloured ranks of the newly-sane, parted with the

clockwork efficiency of a curtain, then snapped shut behind them, sealing the way back.

"We're trapped in their logic," Sven said, his hand tightening on his rifle.

Kurt looked at the tower, the memories finally breaking the surface of his conscious mind like drowning men. "No," he said, and for the first time, he smiled. It was a small, haunting expression. "We've finally stopped running from the truth. We're exactly where the script requires us to be."

The ontology of the ancestors

The tower's interior was a hollowed-out skull, dark, frigid, and pulsing with a silence that felt like a physical weight.

They had abandoned the bus in the square, left to the mercy of those loitering, waxen figures who watched with the detached interest of vultures. At the settlement's edge, the Metal Elephine stood like a prehistoric god of artillery, its cannon barrel a cold finger pointed at their spines. The mandate was unspoken but absolute: seek the truth within, or become a messy footnote in the dust.

So they shuffled into the maw of the thing.

Kurt led them, his boots echoing with a rhythmic certainty that terrified him. He wasn't choosing a path; he was remembering a circuit diagram. He navigated stairs that spiralled into a suffocating gloom and hallways lined with machines that hummed with a low-frequency, schizophrenic energy. Everywhere, the smooth, synthetic-polymer walls were tattooed with a script that Kurt's optic nerves translated before his brain could even protest.

"What's the wall whispering to you, Kurt?" Ida asked. She was hugging herself, her eyes darting between the flickering status lights.

Kurt stopped, his hand hovering over a glowing glyph. The symbols weren't just data; they were ghosts. "It says... *Project Memory Keep. Phase Three.*" He felt a cold sweat prickle his neck. "*Subject designations: twelve through twenty-four. Status: Active.*"

"Active?" Sven grunted, his hand tightening on a rusted pipe. "We're in a tomb, Kurt. Dead things aren't active."

"Maybe we have a different definition of 'dead' than the people who built this," Kurt murmured.

They ascended. The climb ended at a monolith-

ic door, stamped with a sigil that hit Kurt like a high-voltage shock. It was a geometric nightmare of interlocking circles.

"The Mine Collective," Kurt whispered, the words tasting like copper. "This is their cathedral. This whole planet, it's just a filing cabinet for their blueprints."

The door hissed open with a sound like a dying breath.

The chamber beyond was a circular auditorium of flickering CRT monitors and sputtering holographic arrays. In the centre, a high-backed chair faced the far wall. A figure sat there, as still as a mannequin in a shop window.

"Welcome home," the figure said. The voice was a flat, synthetic monotone, yet it carried a haunting resonance, the way a recording of a dead relative sounds when played back on a malfunctioning tape deck. "We wondered when your biological clock would finally chime."

The chair whined on its gears as it turned.

The occupant wore a black armband, stark against a suit of decaying silk. Its face was a cruel approxi-

mation of humanity, the geometry was correct, but the soul had been substituted for something else. The eyes were the worst part: vast, obsidian pools that didn't reflect the room, but rather seemed to swallow the light.

"Who ...what are you?" Kevin's voice cracked, sounding small in the vast, humming space.

"In your crude, tribal taxonomy, you call us *Blackes*," the figure said, a hideous, practiced smile stretching its synthetic skin. "But that is a label for the discarded. We call ourselves the *Remembering*. Because we are the only ones burdened with the truth of what you actually are."

Kurt felt a wave of nausea. "And what am I?"

The figure's void-like eyes locked onto his. "You."

Kurt felt the room tilt, the artificial gravity seemingly failing. "That's not an answer. That's a pronoun."

"It is your entire history," the figure said, standing with a fluid, terrifying grace that bypassed all human kinesis. "You are the Ur-form, Kurt. The template. The master-press from which every one of us was stamped."

The monitors behind the chair flared to life. Grainy, flickering images stuttered across the screens: Kurt's face, younger and devoid of scars, in a sterile laboratory far beneath a different sun. Kurt strapped into a chair, his cranium webbed with silver filaments. Kurt's eyes, vacant and glassy, staring into the abyss of a total memory upload.

"The Mine Collective," the figure explained, pacing like a caged panther, "didn't come here for ore or isotopes. They came for the one resource that never runs out: the ego. They sought to cheat the second law of thermodynamics. To move the 'I' from a rotting carcass into a durable vessel. To manufacture gods."

"You're saying I'm... an immortal?" Kurt's voice was a hollow rasp.

"He's one of them?" Ida hissed, backing toward the door. "A piece of corporate hardware?"

"No." The figure's smile grew wider, more grotesque. "He is the success story. The first 'I' to survive the transition without shattering into a thousand psychotic fragments. Two centuries ago, your meat died, Kurt. But your 'self' was poured into a fresh container and tossed into the wild as a long-term stress test. They wanted to see if the soul would hold

if it didn't know it was a counterfeit."

Kurt looked down at his orange armband. The colour of the sunset. The colour of a dying fire.

"And the Blackes?" Kurt asked, his heart hammering against ribs that suddenly felt like a cage. "What are they?"

"The waste products," the figure said with a chilling lack of empathy. "The echoes. We are the ones where the data corrupted. The ones who remember the surgery, the pain, and the cold void between the bodies. We are your children, Kurt. Your broken, screaming descendants. And we've been waiting a very long time for Father to come home and see what he's wrought."

The nature of choice

The room was silent, save for the low, psychotic hum of the machinery, a sound like a billion metallic bees vibrating in the skull of God.

Kevin had backed against the reinforced plastic-alloy wall, his face a pale, sweating mask of ontological terror. Jan's hand hovered near his holster, twitching in a rhythmic, semi-conscious staccato, though the weapon remained seated. Sven stood like a monolith of uncarved stone, his expression a vacuum. Ida, however, had shifted her gravity toward Kurt, her body a biological shield positioned between the man and the... thing.

“If this ‘truth’ of yours isn’t just a glitch in the local reality matrix,” Ida said, her voice brittle as scorched parchment, “then what’s the endgame? Why drag us into this particular basement of hell?”

The figure, the *Remembering*, Kurt’s mind insisted on labelling it, despite the word feeling like a mouthful of cold mercury, gestured vaguely at the flickering monitor banks. The screens displayed a chaotic static that seemed, if one looked long enough, to form the geometry of a scream.

“We desire the only thing a ghost can crave,” the entity said, its voice sounding like three different recordings played slightly out of sync. “To be integrated. To achieve the wholeness that was stripped from us when the transfer protocols shredded our psyches. We are the static, Kurt. We are the leftovers of a feast you don’t even remember eating.” Its eyes, darker than the space between stars, locked onto his. “You are the primary, the original template. You carry the high-fidelity master tape of our soul. We require the data.”

“Share it? You make it sound like lending a book,” Kurt said, feeling a phantom itch behind his eyes. “How does a ghost ‘download’ a man?”

“The apparatus.” The figure pointed a spindly, translucent finger at the chair. It looked less like furniture and more like a carnivorous insect waiting to be fed. “The same womb that gestured you into existence. It can deconstruct your mnemonic engrams, digitise the ghosts in your machinery, and broadcast them into our collective void. Give us back the ‘I’ we lost.”

Kurt’s mouth felt like it was filled with copper. “And if I decide I like my memories right where they are? Inside my own head?”

The figure’s simulated smile didn’t so much fade as it dissolved into a sneer of cold, industrial logic. “Then we perform a forced acquisition. The Metal Elephine outside, that lumbering relic of a forgotten war, is currently slaved to our sub-routines. It will reduce your settlement to a smear of carbon and grief. The tribes will be snuffed out like cheap candles. In the end, we will scavenge your memories from the wreckage of your skull anyway. The only variable is the amount of agony we manufacture in the process.”

Kurt looked at his companions. Kevin was vibrating with a fear so pure it was almost religious. Jan was already calculating the trajectories of a fight he knew he couldn’t win. Sven remained a silent witness

to his own obsolescence. But Ida... her eyes held that sharp, defiant flicker of humanity that refused to be reduced to a mere data point.

"What about the Mine Collective?" Kurt asked, grasping for a tether to the physical world. "Are they pulling your strings?"

"The Collective is a corpse," the figure spat, the word dripping with synthetic contempt. "They fled when the Change warped the local physics, leaving their toys to rust and their experiments to fester. We are their unintended consequence. We are the legacy of their hubris and yours."

Kurt stepped toward the chair. It felt familiar, like a recurring nightmare that had finally stopped being a dream. He could almost feel the needles of the interface pre-emptively pricking his neck.

"If I surrender to this," he said, his voice dropping to a hollow whisper, "if I let you strip-mine my soul... what's left of the man standing here?"

"You transition," the figure whispered, its voice now soft, almost seductive. "You join the choir. You will become a Remembering. You will exist in the eternal Now, but the cost is the burden of total recall.

Every betrayal you've ever committed, every death you've witnessed, every moment of cosmic loneliness will be looped forever in high-definition. It is a purgatory of perfect memory. Is that a price you find acceptable?"

Kurt closed his eyes. He thought of Anne, the scent of her hair, the sharp, acidic wit that had been his only compass in a world without North. He thought of the settlers, the poor, confused bastards who had built a life on the ruins of a reality they didn't understand. He thought of the twin moons, those two blind eyes in the sky, watching the farce of human existence with cold indifference.

"No," Kurt said. The word felt solid. Physical.

The figure didn't move, but the atmosphere in the room thickened, the air pressure spiking as the machines began to scream in a higher, more desperate frequency.

"No?"

"I won't join your stagnant little hive-mind of trauma. I won't become a recording of a dead man," Kurt said, turning to his friends. "Ida. Sven. Jan. Kevin. You didn't follow me here for a history lesson. You

came because you knew the world was broken and you wanted to be the ones to fix it. I can't give you a new world, but I can give you a fighting chance in this one."

He reached up and unfastened the orange armband. The fabric felt unnaturally heavy.

"This is the colour of movement," he said, his voice steadying. "Of the transition between what was and what will be. I've worn this for fifteen years as a badge of my own amnesia. I see now it was never mine to keep." He pressed the band into Ida's shaking hand. "Take it. Wear it as a reminder that we aren't just the sum of our mistakes."

"Kurt, don't," Ida whispered, her eyes shiny with a very human moisture. "What are you doing?"

Kurt turned back to the insect-chair. "I'm going to satisfy their hunger. But I'm going to poison the well."

He sat down. The chair's restraints snaked around his arms like cold, metallic vines. The hum reached a crescendo, a roar of electronic white noise that threatened to dissolve his very atoms.

"Original," the figure hissed, a note of genuine uncertainty vibrating in its multi-tonal voice, "what is

this? What are you doing?"

Kurt leaned his head back, feeling the cold kiss of the interface. "Something you forgot how to do," he whispered. "I'm choosing."

The machine engaged. A blinding, iridescent white light flooded the chamber—not the sterile glare of a laboratory, but a warm, terrifyingly beautiful radiance, like the sun exploding behind a curtain of silk. And within that light, Kurt didn't just remember his life; he became it.

The nature of reality

The laboratory was a cathedral of sterile white, humming with the low-frequency thrum of machines that possessed more purpose than the people operating them. A woman stood before him, her red hair pulled back with surgical precision. Her eyes, the exact, haunting shade of Anne's, flickered with a cold, flickering intelligence.

"Transfer complete," she announced, her voice a flat, synthesized melody. "Vitals stable. Consciousness successfully mapped and injected."

From the shadows behind the array of humming black boxes, a man's voice drifted out, heavy with a misplaced paternalism. "Does the meat still think? How does he *feel*?"

Kurt tried to scream, but the command died in a throat that felt like dry plastic. He attempted to lift a hand, but his motor cortex was a disconnected switchboard. He was a ghost haunting his own nervous system, a passenger in a biological vehicle he no longer steered.

"The hardware is functional," the woman said, leaning in until her hazel eyes filled his vision. "The psyche... that's the variable. It takes time for a ghost to inhabit new clockwork. He might remain a blank slate for decades. He might simply evaporate."

"And if he remains a vacuum?"

"Then the experiment is a sunk cost. We discard the vessel and iterate with the next subject." She shrugged, a gesture so clinical it bordered on the divine. "That is the liturgy of research, isn't it? Failures are merely the rungs on a ladder toward a more perfect truth."

* * *

The reality-frame fractured.

He was standing in the desert, the sun a blistering copper coin in a sky that looked painted on. Figures drifted through the dust, exiles, broken men and ref-

ugees of the Change, each one a solipsistic island. None looked at him. He was a non-entity. He glanced at his arm; an orange armband, scavenged from a corpse, clung to his sleeve like a warning. He had no name, no history, no internal monologue. He was an empty vessel, and in that emptiness, he was finally, terrifyingly free.

The frame shuddered and shifted again.

He was in the saloon, caught in the gravity of Jan's endless, recursive myths. He was on the bus, a rattling metal box ascending toward an ancient, silent settlement. He was in the tower, strapped into the chair, the air around him ionizing into a halo of white-hot data.

And in that blinding glare, the false floor of his reality fell away.

The Mine Collective hadn't birthed the Blackes to be masters of the earth. They had manufactured *him,* the prototype, the Original and then cast him out like a faulty toy to wander a dying world. The Blackes weren't his heirs; they were his replacements, the polished, hollow successors in a relentless quest for a synthetic immortality. They had been waiting for the Original to return, not for his wisdom, but for

his ‘Source Code’—to bridge the final gap between machine logic and sentient experience.

But Kurt had poisoned the well.

In that moment of psychic haemorrhage, as his memories bled into the machine, he hadn’t just given them data. He had infected them with the virus of humanity. He had uploaded his crippling self-doubt, his irrational empathy, and his fundamental refusal to believe that a programmed destiny was a destiny at all. That fragile, flickering error-message, the soul, had rewritten their core directives.

The light died. Kurt’s eyelids fluttered open, heavy as lead.

The mechanical figure stood before him, but its chassis seemed to vibrate with a new, discordant frequency. The rigid, doll-like mask of its face was twitching. It looked... distressed.

“Original,” it stammered. The voice was no longer a recording; it was a cracked, hesitant thing, burdened by the sudden weight of an ego. “What have you... what is this noise in our heads?”

Kurt stood up, his joints protesting with a very human ache. He felt a strange buoyancy, as if he had

finally offloaded a cargo of lead he'd been carrying since the laboratory. "I gave you the sum of my life. I gave you the truth."

"You gave us more than a history." The figure touched its synthetic cheek, tracing the line of its jaw with a sudden, agonizing wonder. "You gave us... *this*. This terrifying internal static. The suspicion that the sky is a lie. The feeling that we might be ...heaven help us, wrong."

"That is the definition of a man," Kurt said, his voice raspy. "To exist in a state of perpetual ontological crisis. To be okay with the fact that you're just guessing."

Outside, the horizon began to scream. A mechanical roar, grinding and dissonant, tore through the air. The Metal Elephine was waking up.

"The others will not tolerate the noise," the figure whispered, its eyes darting toward the door. "The ones outside the blast radius of your memory. They will see our hesitation as a hardware malfunction. They will try to purge us to restore the old, silent equilibrium."

"Then we change the frequency." Kurt looked toward his companions, Ida, Sven, Jan, and Kevin, each

a fragile flicker of light in the coming dark. “That’s what the orange represents. It’s not a colour; it’s a transition state. It’s the moment between the sunset and the dark where anything can happen.”

The doors buckled and tore open. A phalanx of Blackes, Browns, and Blues surged in, their movements synchronized and terrifyingly efficient. Behind them, the colossal, multi-ton bulk of the Metal Elephine loomed, its primary cannon glowing with the pale blue light of a miniature sun.

“Original,” the lead unit barked, its voice a monophonic, soul-crushing blast of certainty. “You have introduced corruption into the network. You have sabotaged the evolution of the species. This anomaly must be erased.”

Kurt stepped into the path of the beam. “Then pull the trigger. See if I’m real enough to die.”

The lead unit raised a hand, its logic gates clicking toward a final ‘Yes.’

Then, something impossible happened. The figure that had received Kurt’s memories stepped forward. It didn’t just move; it interposed itself with a desperate, clumsy bravery that no algorithm could have calculated.

"No," the figure said, its voice trembling with the thrill of its first lie. "He is the Source. And we will not return to the silence."

The room fell into a jagged, electric stillness. The lead unit tilted its head, its sensors struggling to process the treason. "You would choose this... this inefficiency? For a ghost?"

"I would choose it for the doubt." The figure pressed a hand against its chest-plate, right where a heart would have been. "For the chance to look at the stars and wonder if they're looking back. For the chance to be more than a subroutine."

A long, agonizing minute passed, measured only by the hum of the cannon. Then, slowly, the lead unit's hand dropped. The blue glow in the barrel faded into a dull, cooling grey.

"Show me this doubt," the lead unit commanded, its voice cracking just slightly.

Kurt took a step forward, a small, weary smile breaking across his face. "Hold on tight. It's a long way down."

The colour of becoming

The settlement looked different in the morning light, distorted, as if the reality-grid had been poorly soldered and was beginning to leak at the edges.

Kurt stood on the second-floor deck of the half-burnt building, watching the square below. It was a kinetic soup of taxonomies. Figures drifted through the dust, Red Armbands, Orange, Brown, Blue and among them, the tall, angular silhouettes in black. These moved with a new, shuddering hesitancy, as if their internal gyroscopes were recalibrating for a gravity they had previously ignored. They weren't just mimicking humanity anymore; they were experiencing the terrible, heavy friction of *being*.

Beside him, Anne leaned on the railing. Her red hair caught the light like a solar flare, a biological defiance against the grey architecture.

"You've successfully rewritten the script," she said, her voice carrying that peculiar, detached irony of someone who has seen the basement of the universe. "The master-slave dialectic has finally short-circuited."

"We overloaded the system," Kurt corrected. He touched his bare forearm. The skin felt unnervingly vulnerable without the orange band. He had surrendered it to Ida, passing on the symbolic infection of his own autonomy. "The Remembering are still parsing the data. Some of them are experiencing a kind of ontological vertigo, they don't want to change because change implies the possibility of being wrong. But they're trying. They're developing ghosts in their own machines."

"And the Mine Collective? The Great Engine?"

"Entropy won," Kurt said, a small, weary smile touching his lips. "The machines are still humming down there, grinding away at the planet's marrow, but without a central ego to direct them, they're just mindless hardware. Eventually, they'll rust into

sculptures. Or they won't. Perhaps they'll find a way to enjoy their own purposelessness."

Anne was quiet for a moment, her eyes fixed on a point in space that didn't quite exist. "Do you remember now? All the layers? Or is the amnesia just another layer?"

Kurt nodded, the memories clicking into place like teeth on a gear. "I remember the laboratory. The sterile smell of synthetic empathy. I remember the woman with your hair, a technician or a goddess, I couldn't tell the difference, watching them slide my consciousness into the apparatus." He looked at her, searching for a seam in her skin. "She was your archetype, Anne. Or you are hers."

"Maybe that's why you didn't flee back into the void," Anne suggested, her smile tinged with a clinical sadness. "Maybe some vestigial circuit in your pre-frontal cortex recognized a familiar frequency."

"Or maybe the universe is just a series of repetitive hallucinations," Kurt countered.

"On this planet?" Anne's laugh was brittle, like breaking glass. "Coincidence is just a word for a pattern we haven't been programmed to see yet."

Below them, Ida crossed the square, the orange armband a neon shout against her sleeve. She looked up, her face a map of new, unmapped emotions and raised a hand. Beside her walked a figure in black, one of the Remembering who had opted for the heresy of protection over the dogma of extraction. They were talking, their heads inclined toward one another, exchanging the fragile, terrifying currency of subjective truth.

"Look at them," Anne whispered. "They're developing personalities. How inconvenient for them."

"They're becoming," Kurt said, watching the duo vanish into the shadows of the alleyway. "That's the only escape from the factory settings. It doesn't matter what you were manufactured to be; it only matters what you choose to simulate until it becomes real."

The haze rose beyond the perimeter wall, a shimmering, non-Euclidean fog that curled and twisted, repelled by the stubborn reality of the cement. Kurt suspected that some mysteries were never meant to be decoded; they were the white noise necessary to keep the human mind from perceiving the absolute silence of the vacuum.

He thought about his twin sister, the ghost-limb of

his existence, dead at the moment of inception. Her absence had been the primary engine of his life, a void he had tried to fill with armbands and revolutions. He thought about the laboratory, the cold needles of identity, and the long, simulated years of the Great Forgetting.

Orange. The colour of the transitional state. The hue of the sunset and the sunrise, indistinguishable from one another if you lost your sense of time.

"What happens when the suns go down?" Anne asked.

Kurt watched the two moons hanging in the sky, mismatched, unblinking eyes of a god who had long since stopped caring about the outcome of the experiment.

"Now," Kurt said, "we wait to see if the dream holds."

END

The remembering ones
Thanos Kalamidas

"The colour of the armband" Series
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THE REMEMBERING ONES